The long road home

Generations of veterans experience varying degrees of post-war anxieties

By Anita Mabante Leach

Army Air Corps veteran Paul Perlongo holds a folded American flag to represent the heroes killed preserving America's freedom in past and current wars during the Chicago Memorial Day parade in Chicago, Ill., on May 27, 2006.

In the documentary *Los Veteranos*, local Latino WWII veterans recounted what they experienced upon returning home from the battlefield.

Some spoke of housing discrimination; others cited a newfound feeling of unity and power, fueled by the pride of having bravely served their country. And there were some who became actively engaged in the betterment of their community, laying the groundwork for landmark civil-rights progress.

The GI Bill helped returning soldiers get an education, leading to better jobs. The membership of organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and the American Legion swelled with returning vets and their families. The community at large welcomed veterans.

It was an era of "can do," with the Greatest Generation at the helm.

But that feeling of being welcomed, of being appreciated, of support, would change with subsequent generations of American veterans. Plus, with National Guard and Reserve experiencing multiple tours of duty, more of today's returning heroes are struggling with injuries, both mental and physical, that put a huge strain on them and their families.

BEWILDERED BY PROTESTS

Oscar Urrea, 58, is a soft-spoken Army veteran who lives in Gilbert. Now retired from the corporate world, he spends time helping other vets and using his artistic skills to create memorials to fallen soldiers. A specialist with the 101st Airborne Division, Urrea saw action at Phu Bai.

His two brothers also served in Vietnam at the same time. While serving, he was injured and was flown home back to the U.S. to heal. After recuperating, he caught a plane to Phoenix by way of Los Angeles.

"They only gave you enough money to get you home from the place of separation. I got $71 to get from (Fort Lewis) Washington to Phoenix – and that was flying standby, space available," Urrea says.

He was unprepared for the "warm" reception

he would experience in Los Angeles.

"In L.A., the protestors were peppering us with bottles, anything they could throw at us," Urrea recalls. "If they saw you in a military uniform, you were guaranteed to get harassed in some way, shape or form."

By the time Urrea got to Phoenix, there were some protestors, "not as congregated, but there were a few."

"You had to wear your uniform and that's what made it harder. We stood out like little ducks on a pond, (and protesters were) getting ready to shoot at you," he says. "That was the only way the military would give you separation pay to get you home.

"When I got to Phoenix, the first thing I did was I walked into the restroom, took my uniform off, put on my civilian clothes, packed my uniform inside my duffel bag and said, that's it, I'll never wear this thing again, not after what I'd been through."

Shunned by an irate public, the veterans turned to their fathers' organizations for support. They found none, Urrea remembers.

"The American Legions and the VFWs of the time would not recognize the Vietnam vets as veterans. Even though you showed them – 'I've been in combat, I've got wounded, got medals, just like you old guys did.' And they said, 'I'm sorry, you cannot join us.' " (These organizations later would welcome Vietnam veterans. Today, Urrea is a member of the American Legion, Ira Hayes Post 84, in Sacaton.)

The only thing he could count on for support was his family.

"As Latinos, what we always treasure is family. Yes, you have your family backing you up 100 percent. They're home, they're watching the news. They really had no idea what was happening in Vietnam, aside from what the media was feeding them.

"We were not losing the war. On the average we were losing 300, 400 guys per week, then it tapered down to about 100, then less and less as the war wound down," Urrea adds. "The media made them think we were losing the war … it was so politicized.

"We won all our major battles. Our politicians lost it here at home."

A NEW REALITY

"At the beginning it was kind of hard," says Iraq veteran Eric Castro. "I'm an amputee now. When you go to the store, everybody looks at you if you're not wearing a leg. If you're wearing a leg and you have shorts on, people still look at you. That's not really comfortable, but with time and family support you learn to ignore that and go about your life like any other person. It takes time, you learn to adjust and go on."

Castro, 26, lives in Tolleson. He served six months as a sergeant with the 3rd Armored Calvary Regiment out of Fort Carson, Colo. He was deployed in the early months of the Iraq War. His regiment was assigned to Ramadi, Fallujah and everything in between.

One day, while riding in a vehicle designed to transport troops, Castro and his fellow soldiers were attacked outside Fallujah. An anti-tank shell tore through Castillo's vehicle, ripping away his leg.

"I was in the hospital for six months. My whole life from that point has changed," Castro says. "I used to run three to four miles each day. I would put on a backpack and go hiking. I've had to relearn to do the simplest thing. I've got to plan it before I actually do it. Things take longer.

"The big thing is, when (we) come home, we're not the same," Castro says. "Now, you're used to scanning your sectors, making sure no one's trying to shoot you when you drive - always being alert. A lot of people, when they're around you, they are not used to that. It takes awhile to adjust to your real life, of not being in combat."

It has been a huge adjustment, an experience that has been tempered by the support of his parents and family, and military counselors. Castro tries to stay in touch with other veterans, and takes advantage of counseling when he feels he needs it.

"I talk to anybody I can talk to, and that seems to help out. If you talk about it, little by little, it starts going away. You can keep moving on."

REMEMBERING TO THANK OUR AMERICAN TROOPS

Six months ago, the Xerox Corporation launched its online "Let's Say Thanks!" program to send postcards to American servicemen and women deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq and other sites around the world. The company partners with Give2TheTroops, a nonprofit volunteer organization that sends care packages to military personnel. It's easy to log on, pick a design (created by children), write a few lines and voila! it's ready to go. To send a message, visit www.letssaythanks.com.

DIFFERENT SET OF CHALLENGES

Yet it may be harder for today's veterans to adjust than any vets who came before them. Repetitive tours of duty, prolonged assignments and the rising unpopularity of the war are all factors beginning to take toll.

In fact, *Cycles of Deployment,* a survey released in March by the National Military Family Association, shows that "returning service men and women and their families are experiencing high levels of anxiety, fatigue and stress exacerbated by a lack of institutional support." The NMFA, a national group that focuses on influencing policies that affect the lives of military families, surveyed nearly 1,600 active and reserve military personnel.

According to survey results, many respondents say they carry "unresolved anxieties and expectations from their last deployment" to subsequent second or third tours of duty. Respondents whose family military person deployed multiple times reported being "more fatigued and increasingly concerned about their family relationships." For Latinos, this is a critical test of support.

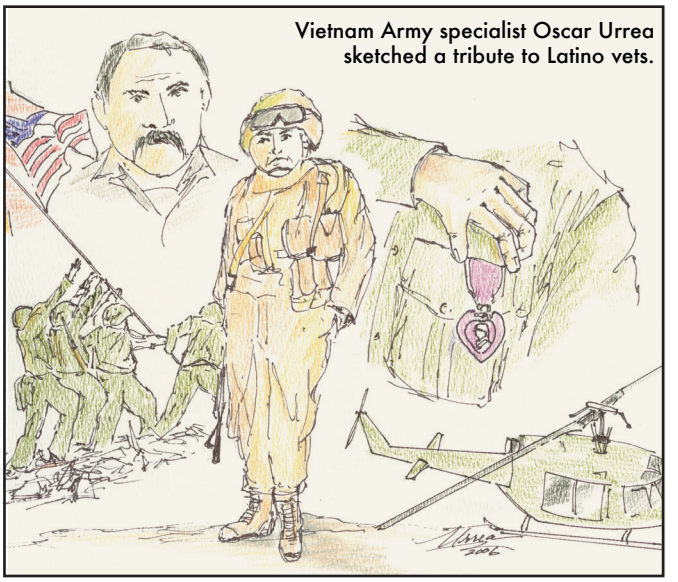
"I see a direct correlation from Vietnam and to the Iraqi war," Oscar Urrea says. "As things prolong, more and more people are going to become more uptight. As warriors, we say, 'Hey, let us do our job - then talk about it later.' "

He encourages new veterans to "log every day, everything that happens to you, no matter how minute the detail. And put down exactly what is happening, who is around you, their names, where they live. It is so important, because after they get out, people tend to go their own way; you lose communication."

This diary-keeping will help if a veteran ever has to file claims for injuries, both physical and mental, or for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The other thing is, he says, don't play hero.

"Ribbons and medals don't really mean things after you're out and you're injured," Urrea says. "Nothing can replace a lost leg an arm an injury that you've sustained. You're never the same when you come back."



Vietnam Army specialist Oscar Urrea sketched a tribute to Latino vets.